

# THE CAVE OF DEAD MEN'S BONES

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An 1847 letter to the editor of the Logan Hocking Sentinel describes a "surprising discovery" near present-day Conkle's Hollow in Hocking State Forest. According to the writer, Joel Gibson, later postmaster of nearby Gibisonville, "after hearing that one of my neighbor's boys had found the skull bone of a human being under a small cleft of rocks in this neighborhood, several of us resorted to the place where the bone was found, which place is some six or seven miles from the mouth of Big Pine, on the north-west side of said creek, on the land of Lewis Conkle, under a small shelf or cleft of rocks. There we commenced digging and clearing away the earth, and to our great astonishment, in addition to the skull bone which was found by the boy, we found three other skull bones, and under jaws with their teeth. Some appeared as perfect as when they were put there. We found many other bones, such as leg bones, arm bones, back bones, breast-bones, ribs, shoulder blades, and a large number of lesser bones of the bodies. Those bones were found in the edge of Benton Tp., Hocking County, Ohio. What makes it more astonishing is that the place has been frequently visited and some of the bones were within two or three inches of the surface of the earth, while some were twenty inches underground. Many conjectures have been made already, but there is no telling how or when those human beings got there; but from the decayed state of the bones, I should suppose that many years have elapsed since they were deposited there—say fifty years or more." (Gibson 1847).

Because Gibson's description of the location of this "small cleft of rocks" is fairly specific, the author was able in 1980 to locate the spot. Lewis Conkle owned land in the northwest quarter, northwest quarter of Section 3, Benton Township, as late as 1876 (Lake 1876: 35). His land lay on both sides of Big Pine Creek, just upstream from the mouth of Crane Hollow, which is the first tributary upstream from present-day Conkle's Hollow. Here, Hocking County Road 11, as well as a State Forest bridle path, parallel Big Pine Creek. A small ledge of Black Hand Sandstone outcrops along the road (DeLong 1967) just above the mouth of Crane Hollow, and this is almost certainly the site that yielded the human skeletal remains more than 160 years ago (Fig. 1).

Unfortunately, although the shelter is on state property, it had been almost completely gutted by comparatively recent (in 1980) potholing. Looking over the back dirt produced only a few small flint chips, several fragments of deer-bone, small naiad shell fragments, part of a turkey humerus, and a robin ulna. A large, elongate sandstone slab with more than a dozen pits also was seen at the back of the shelter (Fig. 2). No ceramics or other artifact material was noted, but no attempt was made to re-excavate the backdirt of the previous, unknown investigators.

Except for rock shelters such as "The Cave of Dead Men's Bones," the upper reaches of Pine Creek offer few likely sites for major prehistoric occupation. Checking the drip lines along the ledges and cliffs of Conkle's Hollow itself revealed only a few scattered flint chips. From Conkle's Hollow downstream, alluvial and glacio-lacustrine terraces occur along the valley and these have yielded scattered chippage and a few points, notably two broken MacCorckle Stemmed bifurcate base blades, indicating at least transient occupation of Pine Creek valley as early as the Early Archaic.

In 1850 another account of "The Singular Cave" was presented in the Logan *Hocking County Republican*, written by an otherwise unidentified F. Edwards. He had visited "the cave of Dead Men's Bones near Mr. John Barton's" in 1848, when the skeletons were originally discovered. Inquiring of Mr. John Kelley, "an old pioneer of the west," Edwards was told that the remains were those of Shawnee Indians. "The 10th of November, 1774, the 2d division of the Earl of Dunmore's army, commanded by Gen. Lewis, at Point Pleasant, had a destructive battle with the Indians, whose loss was upwards of two hundred killed and wounded. The Indians were commanded by Cornstalk, king of Shawanees, who then resided at Chillicothe. This son of the Forest was by no means deficient in foresight and skill. Obtaining early intelligence of the plan of the campaign against them concerted by the Earl and Gen. Lewis, he made a most prudent military arrangement to attack the forces of his opponents separately. By forced marches he reached the Point before Dunmore's division, and the wary savage left Lewis no chance of retreat. Had Lewis been taken the Earl must have shared the same fate, but the Indians failing in the enterprise, threw their dead

into the river and made a speedy retreat that night. Ascending the river some miles, re-crossed upon their rafts, from thence it is thought they crossed to Pine creek where they encamped to bury those who had died, of wounds, on their retreat."

A glance at a map, however, makes it evident that Edwards' theory that the human bones found in the rock shelter belonged to defeated Shawnee warriors is an unlikely explanation, as the most direct route from Point Pleasant to Cornstalk's town would have been the Kanawha Trail, northwest from Gallipolis directly along the waters of Raccoon Creek and Salt Creek instead of the round-about path needed to strike the waters of Big Pine, which flows across Laurel Township of Hocking Co. (Wilcox 1933: 191-193). Although Conkle's Hollow is only some twenty miles from Circleville and about the same distance from Chillicothe, it is quite out of the way of the Kanawha Trail. It seems more likely that these remains were prehistoric burials and that the original excavators failed to note whatever nonskeletal remains were present.

Edwards concluded his account of the "Cave of Dead Men's Bones" with a lengthy poem, "A Thought Upon Those Dead." Though perhaps best left buried in the microfilmed pages of the Hocking Valley Republican, the closing lines are quoted here:

O warrior, brave warrior, no never gain,  
Shall home, love or kindred thy wishes sustain;  
Unbles't and unhonor'd, in pine creek must lay,  
In a cave of salpeter this frame shall decay.  
Earl Dunmore, this tomb's in remembrance of thee,  
While the sand in the cave shall their winding sheet be,  
And winds, in the midnight of winter, their dirge,  
While many brave comrade[s] felt Ohio's surge.  
This mansion's near Barton's, in a cave just below.  
Around the white bones doth saltpeter grow;  
In the county of Hocking this tomb is enrol'd,  
We say, Indian warrior, peace to thy soul.

## References

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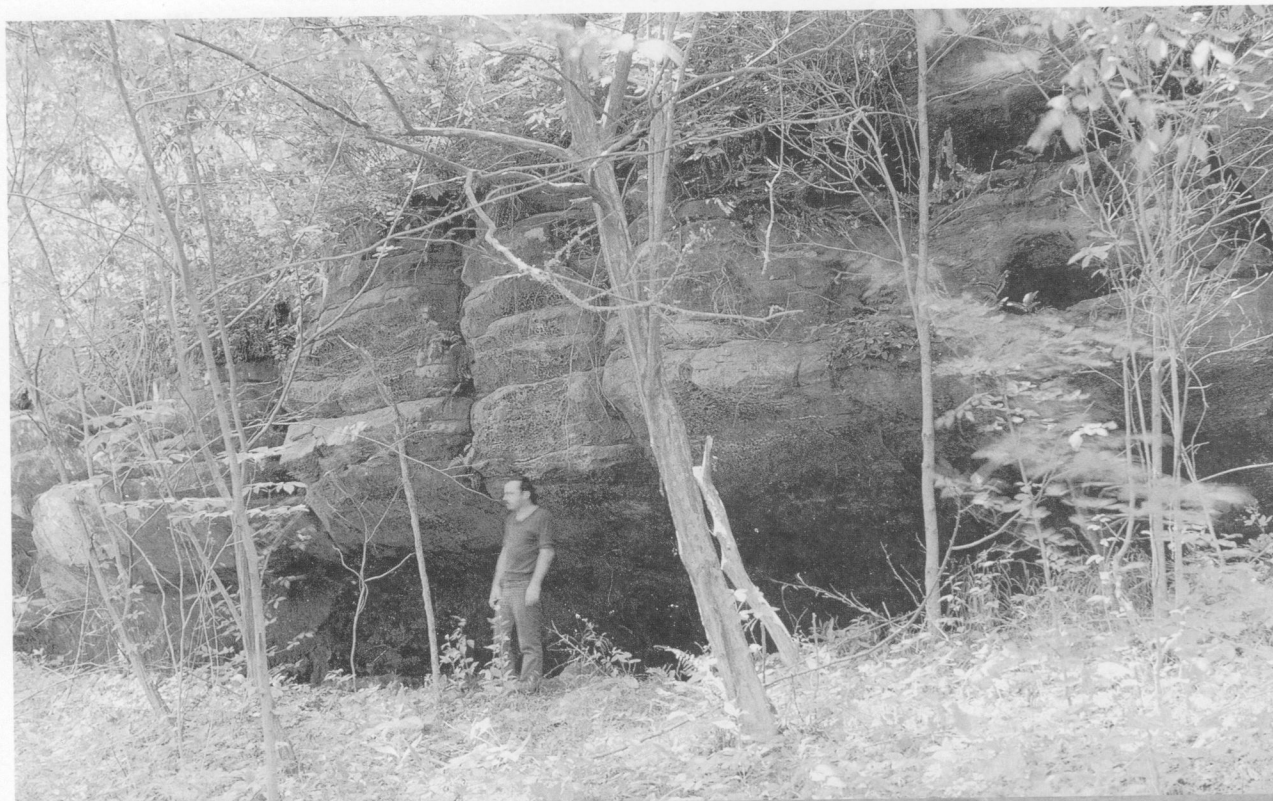


Figure 1.  
(Murphy) "The Cave of Dead Men's Bones" as it appeared in 1980.



Figure 2. (Murphy) Pitted stone at the back of the rockshelter.